

spotlight on
POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY
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The Fight to Save America's Children from Intergenerational Poverty
Senator Stuart C. Reid (R), Utah State Legislature

Utah Governor Gary Herbert recently signed into law Senate Bill 37, which unanimously passed the Utah Legislature and which directs the Utah Workforces Services Department to gather and report data regarding intergenerational poverty and welfare with a focus on children. This law is the first step in advancing evidenced-based strategies and interventions designed to end intergenerational poverty and welfare among children in Utah. If successful, it will help Utah children in poverty prepare to compete and share in the opportunities provided by the American capitalistic system that is enriching the world.

I believe American capitalism is the greatest economic system the world has ever known. It has produced the highest standard of living ever experienced by mankind. The American wealth-engine has not only created prosperity for the United States, but it has helped improve the economic conditions of nations around the world.

American capitalism is based on economic competition and, as with all competition, there are winners and losers. Too often, children are the losers because they are vulnerable and cannot compete on their own. While they depend on adults to compete for them, these adults frequently fail them with intergenerational consequences. It subjects generations of children to cycles of poverty, making them forever economically disadvantaged and dependent upon the government.

More emphasis must be placed on children if America hopes to provide a pathway out of intergenerational poverty and, at the same time, strengthen the middle class. Our economic policy priorities and resources must be focused on evidence-based solutions that are proven to work for children in poverty, including adult accountability for improving children's lives. Where those solutions have not yet been identified, new research and data collection needs to target how to rescue the rising generation of children from intergenerational poverty and welfare.

Answering these questions is critical. Today, well over a third of the welfare cases in Utah are made up of families with at least two generations of children receiving public assistance. For Utah's children to be rescued from the intergenerational failures of adults, they need more than state action—they also need help from the federal government. The federal government's mandated welfare partnerships with the states unwittingly enable intergenerational poverty, which furthers the economic victimization of America's children.

The problem with federally mandated welfare interventions is that they are oriented toward adults involved in "situational" poverty. The characteristics of situational poverty differ from those of intergenerational poverty. Those families in which parents and children have lived in poverty are experiencing intergenerational poverty. In contrast, families can fall into situational poverty after losing wealth or income because of an event like death, illness, divorce, or job loss. Welfare policies and interventions adequate for situational poverty, when applied to intergenerational poverty, frequently do more harm than good. They enable the inculcation of a debilitating, dependent lifestyle into the rising generation of children who have no choice and cannot anticipate nor comprehend the consequences of this lifestyle until it is too late. These children are subjected to an environment that too often results in failing educational achievement, poor health, physical and emotional abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, joblessness, crime, and more poverty.

Utah's new law will be a critical first step in moving away from policy that treats poverty as situational, to one that responds to poverty as an intergenerational challenge. It also shows how taking such a step can be bipartisan.

A virtuous society will vigorously promote public policies that advance the economic wellbeing of children, especially disadvantaged children. Such a society accepts its obligation to help disadvantaged children to compete effectively within the capitalistic system it sustains. Such a society will do what must be done,

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identified by data-based evidence, to halt the cycle of intergenerational poverty on behalf of children. To do otherwise is a manifestation of the worst kind of societal sin and it is not worthy of America, and certainly not Utah.

Stuart C. Reid represents the 18th Senate district in the Utah State Legislature.

The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author or authors alone, and not those of *Spotlight*. *Spotlight* is a non-partisan initiative, and *Spotlight's* commentary section includes diverse perspectives on poverty. If you have a question about a commentary, please don't hesitate to contact us at info@spotlightonpoverty.org.